

Pre-Game Checklists for Success

The last thing I do before stepping onto the field is open my “everything I need to ref a game” box. I started putting all of my officiating gear into a nice box a few years ago for two reasons. One, I wanted room for a laminated checklist on top and a list of key quotes on the inside, and a bag didn’t cut it. Two, the nice box subtly reinforced to me that I was a professional official and I should act like one every time I put on stripes.

Here’s what I keep in my box.

- Whistles (2)
- Scorecards (2)
- Pencils (2)
- Eraser
- Yellow flags (2)
- Twenty-second timer (2)
- Measuring tape
- Watch
- Coin
- Coach certification cards
- Notepad
- Rulebook

As I gear up for a game, I read the quotes on the inside of the box.

“As an umpire, you are neither inside the game, as the players are, nor outside it among the fans, but that the game passes through you, like rainwater through a filter, and that your job is to influence it for the better, to strain out the impurities, to make it cleaner, fairer, and more transparent without impeding it, corrupting it, changing its course, or making it taste funny.”

“It’s not just the opposing team that players and managers want to defeat; they want to get the better of anyone in their way, the umpire included. This essential aggression is built into the game, and it’s something an umpire has to recognize and accept before he can handle himself effectively on the field.”

“Indecisiveness is fatal for an official.”

“We look around the stadium and realize we don’t have anyone on our side except those other men in striped shirts.”

“I have never minded fans objecting to judgment calls or my knowledge of the rules. That is one thing. But when they attack my integrity, that’s where the line is drawn. Officials not only represent the integrity of the game. They are the integrity of the game.”

“The time to deal with a mistake is after the game. Forget it during the game.”

“Like any call, officials have to make a decision, and we don’t have the luxury of being able to wait.”

Note: These quotes come from Bruce Weber’s [“As They See ‘Em”](#) and Mike Liner’s [“It’s Not All Black and White.”](#)

I read these over before every game because they reinforce key officiating attitudes on impartiality, teamwork, and decisiveness into my brain in under a minute. The routine also helps settle my mind on the task at hand, which is especially helpful if I’ve had a stressful day leading up to a game.

Once I’ve read through the quotes and put on all of my required equipment, I close the box and double-check that I have all my gear by going down the checklist and physically touching each piece of equipment. It’s complete overkill, and it’s for a good reason.

Before a game a while back, I had a great pregame discussion with my partner and stepped onto the field ready to work the game. After the coin toss, my partner asked me where I hid my flags. I confidently informed him that I used black-tipped flags and reached towards my waistband, only to discover that I had “hid” my flags in my car. Since that game, I never lock my car without double-checking that I have everything I need.

The last bit of the checklist reads, *“Kill the umpire!”* The words come from Ernest Thayer’s poem [“Casey at Bat,”](#) where the crowd threatens to kill the umpire after he rings Casey up for a strike. It’s a fantastic poem we all listened to growing up, and I use it as a final reminder that I’m going to upset some people during the game, no matter what I call. Since that is inevitable, I might as well focus on the play in front of me.

What works for me getting ready for a game might not be your thing. I like lists, numbers, and particular places for each piece of equipment I need. If you’ve got everything in one bag and that works for you, then don’t go changing. But if you step on the field and you’re anxious, nervous, or unsure of yourself, then I highly recommend finding a few quotes that help calm you down and focus on officiating.

Have fun with it and find some words that speak to you. If you want to learn more about the effectiveness of checklists in other professions, go read [“The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right”](#) by Atul Gawande.

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